



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

The 'Green Book' in Alexandria

Alexandria Times, May 7, 2020

Image: 803 Gibbon Street is the former J.T. Holmes Tourist Home.

May is Preservation Month, a time when communities across the country celebrate historic preservation locally. The City of Alexandria has been a leader in the field of historic preservation, from the creation of the country's third oldest historic district in 1946 to the start of Alexandria Archaeology in 1961.

Many Alexandrians watched the movie "The Green Book," based on the travel guide published from 1937 to 1967 which enabled African American travelers to safely navigate the segregated landscape. Although Alexandria's location and history made it a natural location for listing, "The Green Book" lists only two Alexandria sites during its entire run. Most African American travelers preferred to stop in Washington D.C., a more welcoming town. The Alexandria sites are both tourist homes on Gibbon Street:



J.A. Barrett Tourist Home, 724 Gibbon St., listed 1938 – 1954

Jerry A. Barrett purchased this house in 1904 while working as a railroad porter. He lived here with his wife Sarah and their three children. After the children moved to their own homes, his mother-in-law and sister-in-law joined the household.

By 1920 Barrett began working as a janitor for the Alexandria National Bank, where he worked until his 1934 death, four years before "The Green Book" listed his house as a tourist home. His wife and inlaws most likely operated the tourist home after his death. Although the women worked as cooks and hairdressers, opening their home to tourists would have brought them much-needed revenue.

Sarah Barrett died between 1952 and 1958. The house passed through several owners, was divided into two apartments, and slowly deteriorated. In 1978 a developer purchased this house and every other house on the south side of this block of Gibbon. The new owner "renovated" the entire row. The renovation of 724 Gibbon was really a demolition and new construction, as the current building does not match descriptions of the earlier building. It was re-sold as a single-family home in 1979.

J. T. Holmes Tourist Home, 803 Gibbon St., listed 1938 – 1960

James T. Holmes lived at 803 Gibbon St. with his mother Cora by 1897. Cora, a confectioner, ran a grocery at 533 S. Columbus St., which would have been right behind, or even adjacent to, 803 Gibbon St. James was a bricklayer; he married Arsenius Tyler in 1899.

The 1910 Census lists James, Arsenius, their 6-year-old daughter Ruth, and Holmes' sister-in-law and aunt in the household. By 1919, city building permits indicate that Holmes also owned property at 808 Gibbon. In 1930, daughter Ruth still lived with her parents and worked as a schoolteacher.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Holmes passed away in 1945, and Arsenius and Ruth probably continued operating the tourist home. Arsenius Holmes owned the house until at least 1958, when she received a roofing permit. She passed away in 1964.

In 1984 Olde Towne West Associates purchased 803 Gibbon for \$946,500 as part of a multi-lot sale. This became part of the Dip Urban Renewal project and was renovated and resold as a single-family home in 1986. Unlike 724 Gibbon, this house retains its original architectural elements and appearance.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria or guest authors. This week’s column is courtesy of Susan Hellman.